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How Principals Can Support Teacher Leaders: Lessons from Glenn O. Swing Elementary School

By: Effectiveness Coach Ali Wright

I used to think that the best thing for principals to do to support teacher leadership was to get out of their way. After all, teachers want to make their own decisions and have autonomy in their classrooms as well as in how the school operates. When principals let teachers “do their own thing,” it can feel refreshing. In the short-term, this type of teacher leadership seems to be effective.

But what happens over time is that the teacher leaders either burn out from doing all of the heavy lifting – or they leave. They “outgrow” the leadership at their school as they see more and more opportunities to be challenged outside of the school building. Teacher leaders want to work where they can effect change and be part of something much bigger than themselves.

I now think that the principals who *really* get teacher leadership are the ones who are able – and willing – to roll up their sleeves and work collaboratively with teachers.

This spring I had the opportunity to visit Glenn O. Swing Elementary School in Covington, Kentucky – a school whose off-the-charts test scores rank in the 99th percentile of elementary schools in the state. At this urban school, 90.7 percent of students qualify for free and reduced lunch – and in the last 10 years, the school has eliminated learning gaps. I suspected that the only way that a school could be that high-achieving was for it to be chock full of teacher leaders, but I was blown away by finding out that ALL teachers (including the principal) were engaged in teacher leadership.

Here are a few things that I noted as parts of the school’s “recipe for success”:

1. The principal sets the tone for the culture – one that is observable from the moment you walk in the door. In this school, there are framed pictures of students and families in the hallways. Every classroom door displays the mission and vision of the school, as well as where the teacher received his or her degree. There are elements of Ron Clark’s *Essential 55* everywhere. (The school hosts regular morning assemblies to emphasize these elements, focusing on a different skill each week.) One student in each classroom is assigned as a “greeter” and when I walked into a room, that student would say, “Hello, my name is _____ and welcome to our classroom” while extending a hand to greet me.

2. The principal listens to teachers and creates roles based on student need and teacher expertise. The principal made the decision to assign a male teacher who has great relationships as a behavior coach who now assists all the teachers. This coach visits most classrooms every day and collaborates with a Student Support Professional Learning Community (PLC) made up of the nurse, youth service center director, school counselor, after-school coordinator and the school psychologist. Together they look at the school’s – and individual student’s – behavior data every week. This proactive approach gives the classroom teachers, as well as the principal, more time to focus on instruction.



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3. Everyone teaches. The principal often co-teaches with teachers, and the assistant principal actually teaches a 5th grade social studies class. Both are well-respected as teachers *and* leaders, setting the example for staff that those two things are not mutually exclusive.

4. There is an emphasis on student work, so much so that the principal himself attends all PLC meetings in which the teachers analyze student work. I was able to observe two of these meetings, and what I noticed is that I *didn't* notice a difference between the principal and the teachers. All were at the table as equal partners, focusing on students. They are so good at these discussions that they don't need to use protocols anymore – it is just “what we do.” When I asked a second-year teacher about how she feels about classroom observations and the teacher evaluation system she said, “The best evidence of my teaching is student work. Just look at that.”

5. The school schedule is built around teacher collaboration meetings. Grade levels have common planning every day, with vertical planning for intermediate grades every three days. Teachers also meet once a week after school, and once a month, the principal provides substitutes so grade levels can work together for an entire day.

6. Everyone, including the principal, is responsible for all students. This is something that a lot of schools say is true, but in reality, many teachers just “own” the students on their roster. Here, because of the emphasis on vertical teaming and the role of the behavior coach, they really function as one large classroom. Grade level teachers work collaboratively on their common assessments up to four weeks in advance, then send it to the other grade level teachers and the principal for feedback. (The principal said that he doesn't often need to provide feedback since the other teachers usually say everything that is needed.)

7. The principal works to intentionally build leadership capacity in his school, not only to improve student achievement, but also to retain teachers. He does this not by “having them read a lot of books,” but instead by engaging them in conversations and encouraging peer observations, co-teaching and individual professional development. He knows that the most important thing is for the teachers to be able to “feel accountable” for school success.

8. Did I mention co-teaching? Besides the principal, all other teachers do this on a regular basis. It is not unusual to see co-teaching and peer observation happening on a daily basis so teachers can learn new techniques and hone skills. It is so common there that they don't even see it as a “thing.”

9. No barking! One teacher said that this school is different from her last, because at PLC meetings, “the principal doesn't bark orders at us. It's not the principal who leads our meetings – teachers do.”

10. The principal protects the teachers' time. There are no staff-wide faculty meetings (ever) and the principal works hard to protect teachers' planning times and early-release afternoons as well. There is an observable respect for the work that teachers do, which creates a healthy



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learning community atmosphere where hard work is required, student work is key, and successes are shared and celebrated. In short, teachers want to work here.

Suffice it to say, I'm impressed by what I saw at Glenn O. Swing Elementary School. And I strongly believe we need more schools – and principals – like this one.
